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DE RUEHSQ #0124/01 0781626

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 191626Z MAR 09 ZDK

FM AMEMBASSY SKOPJE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8110

INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE 0497

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000124

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM MK

SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: ELECTION CAMPAIGN GENERALLY POSITIVE

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The campaign for presidential and municipal elections has proceeded far better than parliamentary elections last year. Should the trend continue, we assess that the conduct of these elections should advance Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. There are some municipalities of concern -- especially Gostivar, Struga, and Strumica. The ruling VMRO party's presidential candidate, Georgi Ivanov, is still the clear front-runner. VMRO and its ethnic Albanian coalition partner DUI look poised to hold onto control in their municipalities and perhaps to gain, especially VMRO. (DUI already controls nearly all predominantly ethnic Albanian municipalities.) The Ambassador and Embassy staff have carried out extensive outreach; by election day (first round) on March 22, we will have met mayoral candidates throughout the country. End summary.

So Far, Better...

¶2. (SBU) The consensus of the international community -- including ODIHR's observation mission -- is that in general there is no comparison between the violent and bitter atmosphere in the 2008 elections and the current campaign. The Mayor of Tetovo, Hazbi Lika, told us recently that prior to June 2008 elections citizens were afraid to be out after dark for fear of roving gangs of party "activists." This time there is no such problem. Our visits to Tetovo and many other municipalities confirm this. As we approach the end of the campaign it appears to be calm and orderly thus far. Many Macedonian contacts assert that this is chiefly -- though not solely -- due to concerted international pressure on both the GOM and the political parties to conduct better elections. There is widespread understanding that last year's failure harmed Macedonia as a whole.

...But Not Perfect

¶3. (SBU) There are still areas for concern. Both of ODIHR's preliminary reports and our own contact with local sources suggest that intimidation -- in particular of civil servants to vote for the ruling VMRO (and likely DUI) and to deliver 20, 50, even 100 other votes -- is a real concern. Indeed, Darko Aleksov, head of the respected local monitoring organization MOST, told us March 16 that thus far the elections are "Switzerland compared to 2008, but we're far from the quality of 2006 parliamentary elections, primarily because of intimidation." At the private urging of the international community, PM Gruevski made a public statement on March 17 condemning political intimidation. We have asked President Crvenkovski, who is not running for reelection, to do the same.

Hot Spots? Gostivar, Struga, Strumica

¶4. (SBU) Additionally, the municipalities of Gostivar, Struga, and Strumica feature white-hot mayoral races with genuine bitterness among the candidates and their supporters. These areas will require special attention to ensure a calm end to the campaign and a quiet

election day (in the case of Gostivar and Struga, for both rounds; the race in Strumica should be decided in the first round as there are only two mayoral candidates there). As for the municipal races overall, we expect the ruling coalition parties of VMRO and DUI to do quite well (see ref a).

Presidential Race: Ivanov Versus....

¶15. (SBU) The presidential race has been generally well-run, with six of the seven candidates twice meeting for public restaurant meals to reaffirm their commitment to free and fair elections. (DPA candidate Mirushe Hoxha missed both events for unconvincing reasons.) VMRO candidate Georgi Ivanov appears to be maintaining his front-runner status, but some party leaders have privately admitted to us that he has been a disappointing candidate. Ivanov has skipped several candidate debates and has made some inane public comments, yet no one believes he can be beaten: the VMRO machine behind him is just too strong. The real parlor game has been to try to pick which of the other six candidates will make it to the second round to square off one-on-one against Ivanov. Three of these -- SDSM's Ljubomir Frckoski, former VMRO Ljube Boskovski, and ND's Selmani -- all seem to have a realistic shot. Some contacts have speculated that all three possibilities -- but especially an Ivanov-Boskovski race -- run the real risk of producing a turnout of less than 40% in the second round, which would thus invalidate the presidential election and require the whole process to start all over again with selection of candidates.

Ambassador Outreach: What a Long Strange Trip It's Been

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¶16. (SBU) Over the past weeks and right up to Election Day, the Ambassador has been continuing his outreach throughout Macedonia to meet with the mayoral candidates and Municipal Election Council heads to deliver "on behalf of President Obama and Secretary Clinton" a message of support for free, fair, and peaceful municipal and presidential elections. We specifically focused on municipalities that have had problems in past elections -- especially the flawed parliamentary elections in June 2008 -- and where we expect hotly contested races this time. This resulted in proportionally higher visits to predominantly ethnic Albanian areas, a point noted by some press but not seen as problematic since the inhabitants and candidates seemed to appreciate the extra attention from the Embassy. Macedonian contacts both inside and outside of the government have also expressed appreciation for the Embassy's very active engagement ahead of the elections. The Ambassador held private, joint meetings with the candidates and asked them to make joint public commitments to the National Democratic Institute's Code of Conduct. All told, he will have met candidates in Zhelino, Tetovo, Bogovinje, Gostivar, Debar, Struga, Ohrid, Veles, Tearce, Stip, Strumica, Aracinovo, Lipkovo, Kumanovo, and the Skopje municipalities of Cair and Saraj. At each stop he made clear that the behavior of the candidates and their supporters during the election process will determine the Ambassador's and the U.S. Embassy's view of them and their parties, and promised follow-up meetings after good elections, noting that in each group, one will emerge as mayor and the others will be important community leaders. Embassy staff have made similar outreach efforts in several other municipalities. The Ambassador sent follow up letters to reiterate key points.

¶17. (SBU) In Tetovo March 4 the Ambassador held a joint meeting with DUI party leader Ali Ahmeti and presidential candidate Agron Buxhaku as well as New Democracy (ND) party leader and presidential candidate Imer Selmani. DPA party leader Menduh Thaci refused to attend this meeting on the grounds that he could not be seen by his party to legitimize Imer Selmani's ND, so the Ambassador held a separate meeting with Thaci and DPA's presidential candidate, Mirushe Hoxha. All the leaders and presidential candidates agreed that free and fair elections are critical to Macedonia's future and made commitments to the press following the meetings. Thaci was ultimately forced to defend his decision to not participate in the

meeting with Ahmeti and Selmani to the press but did so without being overly provocative or divisive, stating that he wants his party "to play the role of a fair opposition" and felt he could not meet with the other leaders and effectively convey that stance.

¶8. (SBU) In nearly all predominantly ethnic Albanian municipalities the candidates expressed appreciation for U.S. and other international intervention and attention, pledged free and fair elections, and made a generally good show before the television cameras. Several DPA candidates expressed some frustration that their campaign posters had been torn down (mostly, they claim, by DUI). Since DUI already controls most of these municipalities, its candidates tended to take in the criticism but not to respond, apparently confident in their chances on election day.

¶9. (SBU) In Gostivar, Independent candidate (and former mayor) Rufi Osmani was more forceful, voicing strong concerns about DUI candidate and incumbent Nevzat Bejta's close ties to members of the State Election Commission, Municipal Election Commission, and the Gostivar Chief of Police, and the heavy bias it creates in Bejta's favor. The dislike between the two candidates was evident. We have since received numerous, vociferous complaints and expressions of concern about the campaign in Gostivar, especially from Osmani's supporters. We plan to travel to Gostivar again before election day to assess the situation and -- we hope -- calm any tensions.

¶10. (SBU) The atmosphere in Struga, which the Ambassador visited March 9, was already tense. Struga's mayoral race is wide open and is the only municipal race in Macedonia that is considered a toss up between all the candidates, ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian alike. In the meeting the candidates openly exchanged accusations pertaining to the ethnic make-up of the Local Election Boards, recent inter-ethnic problems in the local schools and recent dirty campaigning by party activists. No individual candidate was singled out by the accusations or excluded from them.

¶11. (SBU) In Ohrid and Veles the candidates exchanged some playful barbs but appeared to mutually respect one another. In both municipalities the hot topic was the lack of municipal funding and decentralization.

¶12. (SBU) The Ambassador visited the predominantly ethnic Albanian Skopje municipalities of Cair and Saraj on March 11. While the mayoral candidates agreed to the necessity of free and fair elections and agreed to this before the cameras, tangible tension was already apparent in both municipalities. In Cair the challenger from New Democracy was the most outspoken candidate, voicing complaints over DUI monopolizing free billboard space with its campaign materials and alleging that their campaign headquarters had been receiving threats. The candidates from DPA and the Democratic

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Party of the Turks also noted inequities in the level of campaign resources DUI had at its disposal compared to the other parties. The concerns regarding billboard space culminated in a heated exchange between the ND candidate, the incumbent DUI candidate, and the MEC president towards the end of the meeting.

¶13. (SBU) In Saraj the candidates of DPA, DUI and ND (all considered contenders) were generally respectful of one another. However, the DPA candidate and DUI candidate (currently an MP) had a brief but lively exchange over DPA's allegations of celebratory gunfire at DUI rallies. The live wire in Saraj was long shot PDP candidate Naser Hamiti who made a blanket allegation against all three of the other parties represented over harassment and intimidation of voters in previous elections. He alleged that as much as 55% of Saraj's electorate had abstained from previous elections out of fear and would be equally afraid to vote in these elections. (Note- While there was substantial evidence of voter intimidation occurring in Saraj during previous elections Hamiti's allegations are grossly exaggerated and are more an indication of his party's desperate situation than actual conditions.) On March 15, the Ambassador attended an NDI-organized round-robin soccer match among DUI, ND, and DPA candidates and supporters. Though a soccer match took place between SDSM and VMRO prior to the 2008 parliamentary elections, such a match between Albanian parties is new.

¶14. (SBU) In a March 13 meeting, the mayoral candidates in Aracinovo -- the predominantly ethnic Albanian municipality near Skopje where a person was killed in election violence in 2008 -- all pledged their commitment to free, fair, and peaceful elections. DPA's candidate complained that DUI has torn 500 of his posters and that he may not even bother putting up more. However, he continued, DPA leader Thaci has sent down clear orders that DPA will not respond to or carry out any "provocations."

¶15. (SBU) In Lipkovo, also on March 13, DUI, DPA, and ND candidates told the Ambassador over a convivial lunch that they have agreed to their own code of conduct for the election campaign. This was one of the few meetings where a candidate did not complain about posters being pulled down, though the ND and DPA candidates did express concern that the DUI campaign HQ was only 50 meters away from a polling station. The MEC deputy chairman confirmed that under the election law DUI would be required to remove all campaign posters from the HQ's exterior on election day.

¶16. (SBU) Finally, in Kumanovo, SDSM Mayor Zoran Damjanovski orchestrated not only a chummy coffee at a local eatery but also a very public stroll through the city's downtown with him plus all six other candidates. At an NDI public forum at which the Ambassador spoke, the candidates all sat front and center and gave their personal pledge for an honorable campaign.

Comment: Cautiously Optimistic

¶17. (SBU) While we are by no means out of the woods yet, the consensus among all parties, the press, and the international community is that the election campaign -- while hardly perfect -- is a significant improvement over last year. Even if this holds true on the first election day, the authorities here still face the major logistical challenge of administering presidential and municipal elections simultaneously, the first time this has been done here. Scenes of chaos at polling stations -- not caused by thuggery but simply incompetence -- would not present a pretty picture here. Nonetheless, our pre-election assessment is that conditions are in place for successful elections.

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